

# Falling Down the Food Chain

*By Maj. Robert Troutman*

**W**hile aboard an aircraft carrier, a lance corporal had a case of insomnia and wanted a breath of fresh air, so he decided to stroll out to a catwalk. Of course, it was early morning, and “darken ship” was still set. A jolt from a hatch knocked him over the railing and into the Arabian Sea, and although he yelled for help, no one heard him, and the ship left him behind. Keeping his wits and remembering his water-survival training from boot camp, he took off his coveralls, tied the leg and armholes together, and filled them with air.

The sea was warm. At night, all kinds of sea creatures were nipping at his body, doing a little taste test to see if he was part of the food chain. He didn’t waste energy trying to swim away. The first night brought four-to-five foot swells; the second night, eight-foot swells periodically put him underwater.

Meanwhile, back on the ship, after 30 hours of being overboard, the lance corporal was reported missing. The first morning, he mistakenly had been reported as accounted for. Even though he didn’t report during two more musters that first day, he wasn’t determined to be missing until the next morning’s muster. Four Navy aircraft and two ships conducted search and rescue efforts. After two days, he was given up for dead.

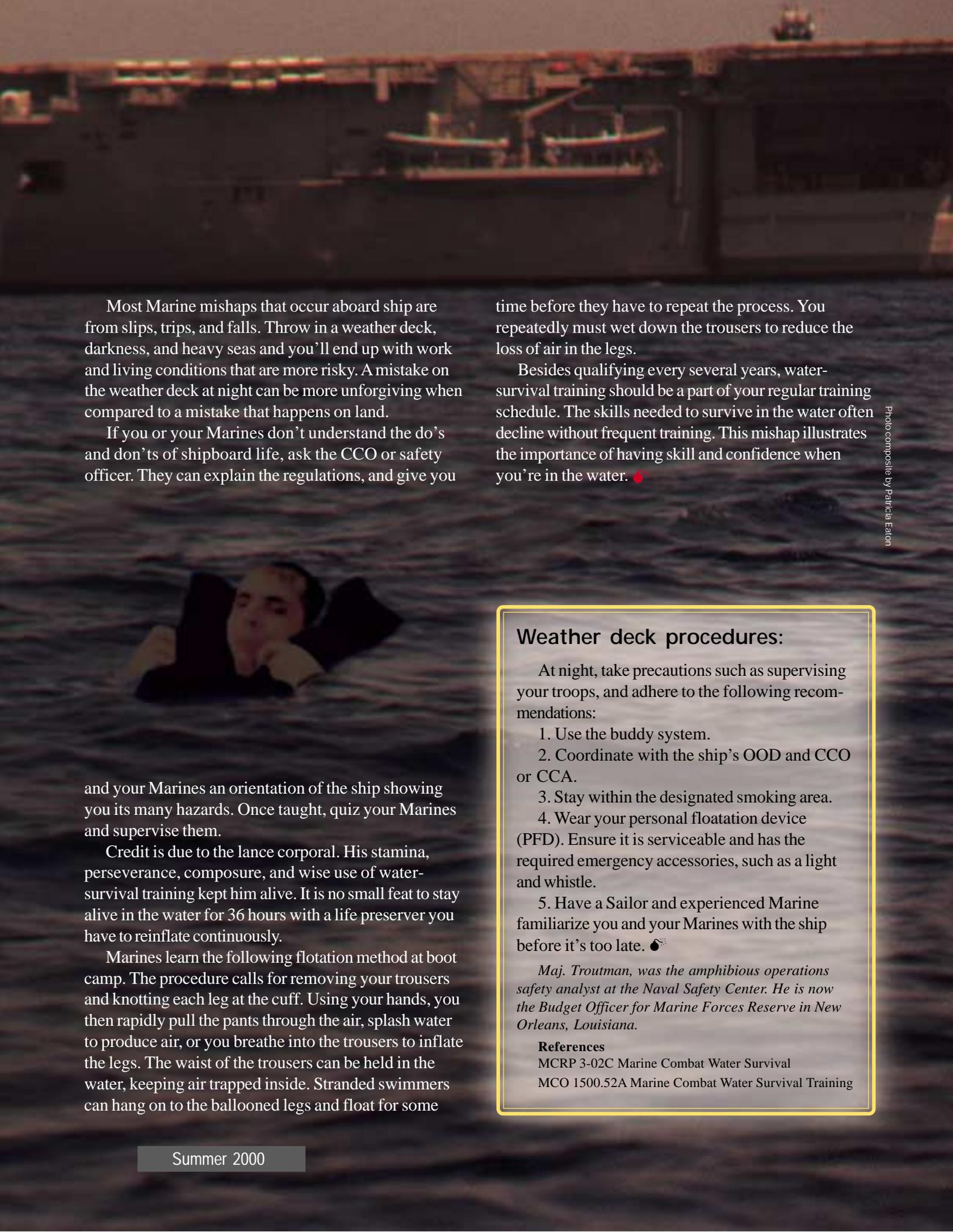
The lance corporal estimated he had to blow or sweep air into the coveralls 4,000 to 5,000 times to keep them inflated. Eventually, the coveralls slipped

from his tired hands. He prayed almost every minute for help to keep him going. Exhausted, he drifted in and out of sleep. After 36 hours in the ocean, he was in a state of delirium and exhaustion when the operator of a Pakistani fishing boat miraculously spotted and rescued him.

Several Marines aboard the aircraft carrier commented that Sailors and Marines would routinely go onto the catwalk after dark. No one should have been on the weather decks after sunset unless they were working and had notified the OOD and the CCO or CCA.

The morning musters were done wrong. The lance corporal routinely was absent, but shipmates reported him accounted for because he usually did PT with fellow Marines before reporting to ship’s company. After this mishap, two Sailors were disciplined for the inaccurate musters. The ship’s CO stressed the seriousness of the requirement for sighting all individuals during each muster.

Even after the lance corporal fell overboard, four shipmates said they saw him aboard ship. One shipmate said he had seen the lance corporal at dinner the evening after the lance corporal had fallen overboard. This mistaken reporting complicated search and rescue attempts because the ship’s crew planned their search grids to correspond with the last time the Sailors thought they saw him.



Most Marine mishaps that occur aboard ship are from slips, trips, and falls. Throw in a weather deck, darkness, and heavy seas and you'll end up with work and living conditions that are more risky. A mistake on the weather deck at night can be more unforgiving when compared to a mistake that happens on land.

If you or your Marines don't understand the do's and don'ts of shipboard life, ask the CCO or safety officer. They can explain the regulations, and give you

time before they have to repeat the process. You repeatedly must wet down the trousers to reduce the loss of air in the legs.

Besides qualifying every several years, water-survival training should be a part of your regular training schedule. The skills needed to survive in the water often decline without frequent training. This mishap illustrates the importance of having skill and confidence when you're in the water. 🚫

Photo composite by Patricia Eaton

and your Marines an orientation of the ship showing you its many hazards. Once taught, quiz your Marines and supervise them.

Credit is due to the lance corporal. His stamina, perseverance, composure, and wise use of water-survival training kept him alive. It is no small feat to stay alive in the water for 36 hours with a life preserver you have to reinflate continuously.

Marines learn the following flotation method at boot camp. The procedure calls for removing your trousers and knotting each leg at the cuff. Using your hands, you then rapidly pull the pants through the air, splash water to produce air, or you breathe into the trousers to inflate the legs. The waist of the trousers can be held in the water, keeping air trapped inside. Stranded swimmers can hang on to the ballooned legs and float for some

### Weather deck procedures:

At night, take precautions such as supervising your troops, and adhere to the following recommendations:

1. Use the buddy system.
2. Coordinate with the ship's OOD and CCO or CCA.
3. Stay within the designated smoking area.
4. Wear your personal flotation device (PFD). Ensure it is serviceable and has the required emergency accessories, such as a light and whistle.
5. Have a Sailor and experienced Marine familiarize you and your Marines with the ship before it's too late. 🚫

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#### References

- MCRP 3-02C Marine Combat Water Survival
- MCO 1500.52A Marine Combat Water Survival Training